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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000464

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NSC FOR BRAUN  
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SUBJECT: KOSOVO'S SOUTHERN SERBS INCREASINGLY RESISTANT TO  
INTERACTION, ENGAGEMENT

REF: PRISTINA 428

Classified By: COM TINA KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. During a series of meetings in the southern enclaves in mid-to-late May, Kosovo Serbs continued to exhibit a strong degree of denial about the imminence of a status decision, expressing firm belief in Russia's ability to halt or at least delay independence. Serbs in the future Serb-majority municipalities of Partes and Ranilug expressed conflicted but increasingly adamant views about what decentralization would mean for them, with one normally cooperative local leader affirming that Serbs would block the formation of new municipalities if it is linked to independence. Though these interlocutors were highly skeptical about the new Serbian Ministry for Kosovo, and more focused on concrete needs of their communities for youth facilities and increased communication links, their fear of openly defying Belgrade's dictates was palpable. The impression of monolithic rejection of international and Kosovar Albanian outreach, engendered by Belgrade and its administrative arm the Coordination Center for Kosovo (CCK), was strengthened during the recent visit of USAID Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik, who was treated to the same kind of polite but resolute rejection of any assistance tied to an independence outcome by local Serbs. END SUMMARY.

Partes leader says Serbs will block the formation of a municipality

12. (C) On May 14 USOP visited several southern Kosovo Serb enclaves and met local Serb leaders from Partes, Silovo, Ranilug and Lipljan. Vesna Jovanovic, a Kosovo Serb MP currently boycotting the Kosovo Assembly along with fellow members of the Serbian List for Kosovo and Metohija (SLKM) -- but nevertheless normally a cooperative and engaging Serb leader who has worked productively with USOP and US KFOR -- told us that the international community should not expect Kosovo Serbs to participate in the implementation of the Ahtisaari plan, if its passage is linked to any kind of independence for Kosovo. Jovanovic agreed that Partes, which urgently needs basic infrastructure development and

facilities for youth, could benefit greatly from the decentralization proposal that would transform it into a new Serb-majority municipality. However, she repeated that Partes Serbs will block the establishment of a municipality there if Kosovo becomes independent. She added that ordinary Kosovo Serbs in her community have placed their faith in Russia's ability to halt the movement toward independence.

¶3. (C) In a comment that echoed others we have heard from moderate Serb leaders recently, Jovanovic lamented that Serbs who engage with the international community in an attempt to improve the situation in their communities are losing credibility among their constituents. She said that regular Serbs are turning against them, and some have even accused her of "working for (Kosovo Prime Minister) Ceku." She acknowledged that this increasingly hard Serb line came despite some improvements on the ground, but was adamant that this position would not be changed. She repeated the same insistent mantra to visiting USAID Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik during his meeting with Partes residents on June 9, the first time USAID Pristina personnel had ever heard this kind of rejectionism from the usually amiable Jovanovic.

Serbs in Ranilug eager to have their own municipality

¶4. (C) In a conversation that contained many of the same themes, attorney and former Kosovo MP Ljiljana Kenic of the Serb-majority enclave of Ranilug (eastern Kosovo) shared similarly conflicted views of decentralization. She maintained that her community looks forward to becoming a new municipality, and hopes their new legal status will lead to budget inflows from both Pristina and Belgrade. However, she pointed out that peer pressure to conform to the general Serb

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policy of non-cooperation with Pristina remains strong. Kenic said she personally is considering seeking work as a judge for the PISG, but said that the enormous salary cut (from 800 euros to 200 euros per month) was prohibitive, combined with negative pressure she would be under from her community if she were to make such a move. Kenic also mentioned that she would consider running for the Kosovo Assembly again, but only with clear support from fellow Serbs and the Orthodox Church, adding that neither will be forthcoming if Kosovo becomes independent. Kenic, who has two young daughters, said she has no plans to leave Kosovo unless her family is threatened.

¶5. (C) Kenic admitted that lack of Serb participation in development of Kosovo's existing constitutional framework hurt her community, and said she feared that the same negative consequences if Serbs do not participate fully in the drafting of the new constitution. However, she declined the proposal that she herself participate, saying that condemnation from the Serb community would be too strong. (Note: Efforts continue by USOP and the International Civilian Office to quietly include Kosovo Serbs in the constitution drafting exercise; so far, most have said no to any public appearance together with the rest of the constitutional working group, but a few say they will comment on whatever proposals emerge.)

Serbs do not expect much from the New Serbian Ministry for Kosovo

¶6. (C) None of the Serbs we spoke to had high hopes, at least in terms of increased funding or attention, for the newly created Serbian Government Ministry for Kosovo. Former Kosovo MP Ljubomir Stanojkovic, from the Serb enclave of Silovo in Gnjilan municipality, told us that he hoped the Ministry would at least be better resourced and have stricter financial controls than Belgrade's Coordination Center for Kosovo and Metohija (CCK). (Note: The Kosovo Ministry will subsume the CCK structure, though the CCK will apparently remain intact.) Pointing out fresh construction in Silovo, he said Serbs there will stay regardless of what Belgrade

tells them to do "unless there is another March 17"  
(referring to anti-Serb riots in March 2004).

¶7. (C) COMMENT: These contacts and comments are anecdotal, but they mirror what we have seen at every level of Serb engagement in Kosovo: a hardening attitude, based on pure rejectionism from Belgrade and an increasing conviction that the Security Council process will lead to stalemate. As we have noted earlier (reftel), the wall of obstruction that is being built brick by brick will be difficult to dismantle, at least immediately, and will put an additional burden on the incoming International Civilian Office to gain Serb buy-in at even the most basic level. We believe this puts a premium on continuous discussion and assistance -- where it is accepted -- to such Serb communities, particularly in the south, and we are planning and budgeting for a variety of small infrastructure and other supportive activities with FY07 money and beyond. We will encourage our ICO and donor colleagues to do the same. End Comment.  
KAIDANOW